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# Where Are the Old Paths?

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A BIBLE

AND

DENOMINATIONAL STUDY
FOR METHODISTS

BY

SAMUEL F. COOK

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# Where Are the Old Paths?

"LOOK YE OUT AMONG YOU SEVEN MEN OF HONEST REPORT, FULL OF THE HOLY GHOST AND OF WISDOM, WHOM WE MAY APPOINT OVER THIS BUSINESS.

"BUT WE WILL GIVE OURSELVES CONTINUALLY TO PRAYER AND TO THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD." —Acts vi, 3 and 4.

At the time of the recent session of the Rock River conference, one of the great Chicago dailies, in an editorial intended to be highly eulogistic of both the Methodist Episcopal church and the body of men which was then convened in that city, administered, without knowing it as we may suspect, a most stinging rebuke to the whole body of Methodist preachers in the following words: "Other Protestant churches have preachers as pious, as learned, as eloquent, and the Catholic church has pastors as proficient in the work of organization, but the Methodist Episcopal church is peculiar in its demand for 'all round

men.' The Methodist minister is in large degree the business manager as well as the spiritual adviser of his church." While there is not a little reason to fear that the words used tell the naked truth, if it be a truth, a sad day, indeed, has come upon Methodism.

The day is not so very distant when it was customary for Methodist ministers, when gathered together, to sing with that rare unction which made their singing famous, the following stanza of one of Charles Wesley's hymns:

> " His only righteousness I show,
> His saving truth proclaim;
> 'Tis all my business here below;
> To cry " Behold the Lamb! "

But now, alas, the " all round men," whose thought and time are engrossed with the " financial interests " of the societies over which they bear rule, and the well nigh unlimited "causes" for the glorification of the denomination, which must be properly presented and urged upon the " prayerful attention " of their audiences, have scarce

any opportunity to preach "Christ and Him crucified," or to exhort, with hearts overflowing with love to God and men, "Behold, behold the Lamb."

The financial management of a business corporation (and that is just what the modern church society has become), and the winning of souls to the Redeemer, are incompatibles which will not mix. "No man can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other," is as true in this case as in the one to which it is usually applied. A keen interest in the financial affairs of a church society and the ardent getting of funds for its needs and ambitions, is not a whit different from the ardent getting of money for one's own business needs and purposes; it begets a covetousness which while it is glossed over by the thought that it is "for the Lord," eats like a canker into the heart, and takes away the power of earnest, longing exhortation, "Behold the Lamb." But worse than all else, the exhortations to flee the wrath to

come, uttered by a man who is a money getter, or "church beggar," are not unfrequently understood as sinister in their purpose; the worldling who listens to the exhortation saying to himself, even if not aloud, "All he is after is to get me into his church so as to get at my money easier."

It is quite evident from the words of our text that the apostles regarded the ministry of the word and the prayer necessary thereto, as the work of specialists rather than of "all round men." They had found that they could not fulfill the duties of almoners for the growing assembly and devote the necessary time to their prayers and the proclamation of the gospel; and regarding the latter as that of most importance, they decided to drop all else and devote themselves wholly to the preparation for and the declaring of the glad tidings of salvation. If the apostles had been of the type of modern ministers, they would have been obliged to scrimp their prayers, shorten their sermons and work unremittingly in devising ways and means by which the col-

lections for the ever multiplying denominational causes might be increased, instead of leaving those matters for persons especially fitted and chosen therefor, while they pursued the quest for souls.

The demand for "all round men" is working like a dry rot to the spiritual ruin of the men, who, if allowed, would gladly preach the gospel earnestly and fearlessly, and is sapping the vitality from the laity who ought to feel an earnest desire to be active in such things as go to make up the christian life and character.

The "demand" compels the "all round man" to attempt to be, whatever his personal limitations, a pulpit lecturer, instead of a preacher of Christ's gospel. At least once each Sunday he must appear before his congregation with subject, words, forms of expression, intonations and gesticulations intended to minister to the esthetic element of their natures rather than to arouse them to action: to sooth rather than to alarm: to quiet their lurking fears rather than to disturb them: to help them congratulate them-

selves that they are very good people rather than to make them feel that they are miserable sinners. He must delve in the realms of literature, art, science, history, archæology, and draw thence material to amuse, instruct, interest, rather than, after holding communion with the living God and deriving lessons of holy truth from the words of the world's Redeemer, that he should, with overflowing heart, proclaim the message of salvation.

The "all round men" are led to spend more time and thought in denominational boasting than is profitable for them or edifying to their hearers. The ordinary listener in Methodist congregations might fairly suppose that the Methodist Episcopal church was the only one of the denominations engaged in the carrying on of foreign missions, or in fact the only one which is doing anything worthy of note. The "all round man" has little opportunity for thought in relation to the whole body of Christ's church, which is made up of the great body of believers all unorganized but faithful

and scattered far and wide, since his vision is closely hedged in by the limits of his denomination; and he is able to say or do little that will give his flock any broader view of christianity and its vital forces. He is a slave to his environment, goaded on by what he deems to be the "demand," and, with rare exceptions, may be described by the homely expression, "jack at all trades and good at none." It must be noted, however, that the probabilities are that the "all round man" will be weakest at the very vital point, the ability to preach Christ and Him crucified with such living power as that sinners will be pricked to the heart, and led to avail themselves of the benefits of the atonement.

A man who is really in earnest in his work for the salvation of men has neither time nor inclination to be an "all round man." When he assumes his work at the dictate of the bishop, he is ready to declare, "I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and Him crucified." He knows full well that if by God's help he

is able to get his membership thoroughly aroused with gospel ardor, and sinners pleading for mercy, the financial affairs of the congregation will, with the active interest of the regularly constituted church officials, take care of themselves.

The services of the "all round man" are an actual detriment to the society over which he has been appointed as guardian of their spiritual life. The demand which makes such an anomaly possible, is the result of the disposition, innate in the human heart, to have its acts of piety done by proxy. It is much easier to pay some one to do the right things which all admit to themselves ought to be done, than to be burdened with the care and responsibility of the doing. We complain that we have no time to share in the detail of the work and interests of the society to which we belong, and insist that the care, labor and enthusiasm which we feel ought to be given to the cause we profess to love, shall be bestowed by some one in our stead; and who so convenient as the man we call our pastor,

since he must of necessity know the various needs, and his salary is already provided for. The poor man thus imposed upon, feeling that since he is the servant of his flock he must do everything which is left undone by others, plans and devises ways and means for the conduct of the society's affairs, grinds at the large amount of clerical work necessary for the proper records, correspondence and accounting, attends the social gatherings, where he receives unlimited advice as to the work he ought to do, and comes to his pulpit on Sunday morning, worn in body and jaded in mind, and with thoughts sadly awry from those which are necessary to a soul stirring exhortation to saints and sinners to be reconciled to God.

Change is not always improvement. The flight of years does not necessarily signify real progress. Methodism, as originally devised, placed the financial affairs of the society in the hands of the laity. The stewards devised the ways and means, and the class leaders collected the contributions and paid them over to the stewards

for their disbursement. The societies being divided into classes of about twelve it was the duty of each leader to see each member of his class at least once a week, and receive what each one could afford for the "support of the gospel." While the leaders were the special spiritual advisers of those committed to their care, they were the ones whose duty it was to urge liberality in the aid of the work of the society, and the authorized collectors. The abandonment of this phase of the duty of the class leaders, is directly responsible for the labored sermons on "Christian giving," and the long evening sessions of the "official board," while they formulate and elaborate "plans," and finally fall back on that easy escape from their troubles, the adoption of a resolution instructing the pastor to make his greatest effort in wringing the necessary funds for the work of the society from the pockets of his audience.

Money, or any related theme, ought never to be mentioned in the presence of a company of people gathered for the worship of

God and adoration of the Redeemer of mankind. The pastor who is driven to make financial appeals to his audience, is rendering his own life barren, and the prime object for which the society was organized, namely, the conversion of sinners and the upbuilding of the membership in their most holy faith, is for the time lost sight of, and the opportunity for declaring the mercy and love of the Redeemer is lost forever. God is not worshipped with men's hands as though he needed anything, and it comes with ill grace from a christian pulpit, to ask money from an audience in aid of the gospel which Christ declared is to be had without money and without price. Instead of having the funds necessary for the conduct of the society's affairs collected by the class leaders quietly and apart from the general congregation, the contribution box is made so prominent that one cannot well help feeling that before he can hear the lecture he must pay the lecturer. All this is sadly foreign to the gospel which Christ proclaimed.

There are some preachers of such gross

mould as that they profess to receive great spiritual blessings as the result of their immoderately importunate begging from the pulpit; but it may be fairly suspected that their feeling is very akin to that experienced by the auctioneer who after great effort has been able to run the bidding far above the value of the article offered, and by so doing has increased his own percentage and added to his reputation in his profession. Verily, they have their reward. It is, indeed, a sad commentary on the frailties of humanity, that these men are satisfied with the feeling of exultation over their success, rather than covered with shame that they had wasted an opportunity to cry "Behold the Lamb," whose messengers they profess to be.

The "all round men" are the victims of their environment, but not a little of the blame for their environment rests with themselves. They all too tamely submit to the demands made upon them, instead of declaring, "We will give ourselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the word; look ye out men of honest report

whom we will appoint over this business." They chill themselves and their flocks with the thought and talk of money, and when the annual revival season comes around they are not in spiritual trim for preaching or exhortation, and so send for an evangelist to help them out with the required additions to the church, while they devote their thought and energies to raising the money to pay the professional revivalist. As organized by Mr. Wesley, Methodist preachers were all professional revivalists. They were devoted to that one thing. Their converts were trained as exhorters, and, not infrequently, the words of the exhorters, warm with the love of Christ, were more powerful than the carefully prepared sermon. The "all round man" has no place for an exhorter (he has too much religion and too little culture). He cannot share with any other the work of the gospel. In the society over which for the time being he bears rule, the "demand" compels him to be all sufficient (except when the official board regard a revival as necessary to the finances of the society).

The book of discipline reads as it did of old, but the advent of the "all round man" in answer to the demand, has rendered very many of its wise provisions nugatory. Mr. Wesley, with a keen insight into the frailties of human nature, devised a system which was intended to strengthen it at its weak points. In every religious society there should be at least one out of every fifteen members charged with the care of, and responsibility for the well being of their brethren. There is no one office which is so much needed by the membership at large as is that of class leader. The class leader has the most constant incentives to the best, and the members of his class need just the watch-care which a faithful leader can bestow. A class leader who goes about the duties of his office with an earnest desire for the best results, is liable to develop into an exhorter, than which no christian organization has an office fraught with greater opportunities for good. A class leader and exhorter combined in one, was the very ideal for religious power, under the Wes-

leyan regime. A society with one-fifteenth of its membership class leaders, has no occasion for an "all round man" as its preacher in charge. The intimate acquaintance of the class leader with his dozen or fifteen members, enables him to advise as to the amount of their liberality, and if he deems them to be lacking in that regard, he, better than anyone else, can urge them to a proper effort in those directions. What Methodism needs far more than "all-round men" is a full reinstatement of the original class leader system. With one-fifteenth of its membership in active work in the care of classes, constant revivals would be in progress, the finances of the societies would cause the stewards no sleepless nights, and the pastors would have the opportunity to be, as was the design of Methodism, preachers in charge, marshalling the forces under their command, and sure of victory. The present system, or lack of system, is very like that of a regiment without any division into companies, and whose colonel should attempt to lead the unorganized body into

battle. The result would be simply a sickening disaster. The true Methodist system is a complete organization, in which each society is a regiment, each class a company, and the stewards, local preachers and trustees the regimental officers, with the preacher in charge as the colonel. A society of christians organized and officered in this way is an invincible body, both as a business corporation and a moral force.

It is time for the demand for "all round men" to cease, and that there be a genuine return to the benefits which cannot fail to accrue from the class leader system and the organization which results therefrom. Methodism began its wonderful career as a revival of personal religion, and the methods adopted for the conduct of the societies were founded on no slight appreciation of the needs of human nature. The reasons for the existence of those methods will exist as long as men and women continue to "strive to enter in at the straight gate." They are founded in the needs of the human heart and mind. They are adapted to the

individual needs. They accomplish for the general needs of the societies what is entirely lacking in the makeshifts which have been allowed to take their place. That old-fashioned croaker, the prophet Jeremiah, said in one of his exhortations, "Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls." The abandonment of the basic principles upon which the Methodist societies were founded, and in whose strength and correctness those societies achieved such a wonderful success, is very like laying deep and strong foundations for a lofty structure, erecting thereon the outer and inner walls, putting in the girders and braces, and when the building towers well aloft, deliberately digging out the foundations and relying on the superstructure to retain its poise and position, held in place only by its own structural excellence.

Every true Methodist who desires the best for the future of the "United societies," should heed well the exhortation of the

ancient prophet, and look for the old paths and the good way, not only that the most good may come to himself, but to all those who are united with him in the work of hastening the spread of the gospel. The changed times have not changed the facts of human nature, and the same methods of christian labor which proved so grandly successful in the hands of the fathers, are more thoroughly adapted to the needs of the present than any other.

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